

VOICES & visions

SECTION B



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*Southeast Conference Edition
United Church News*

Generosity in its many forms

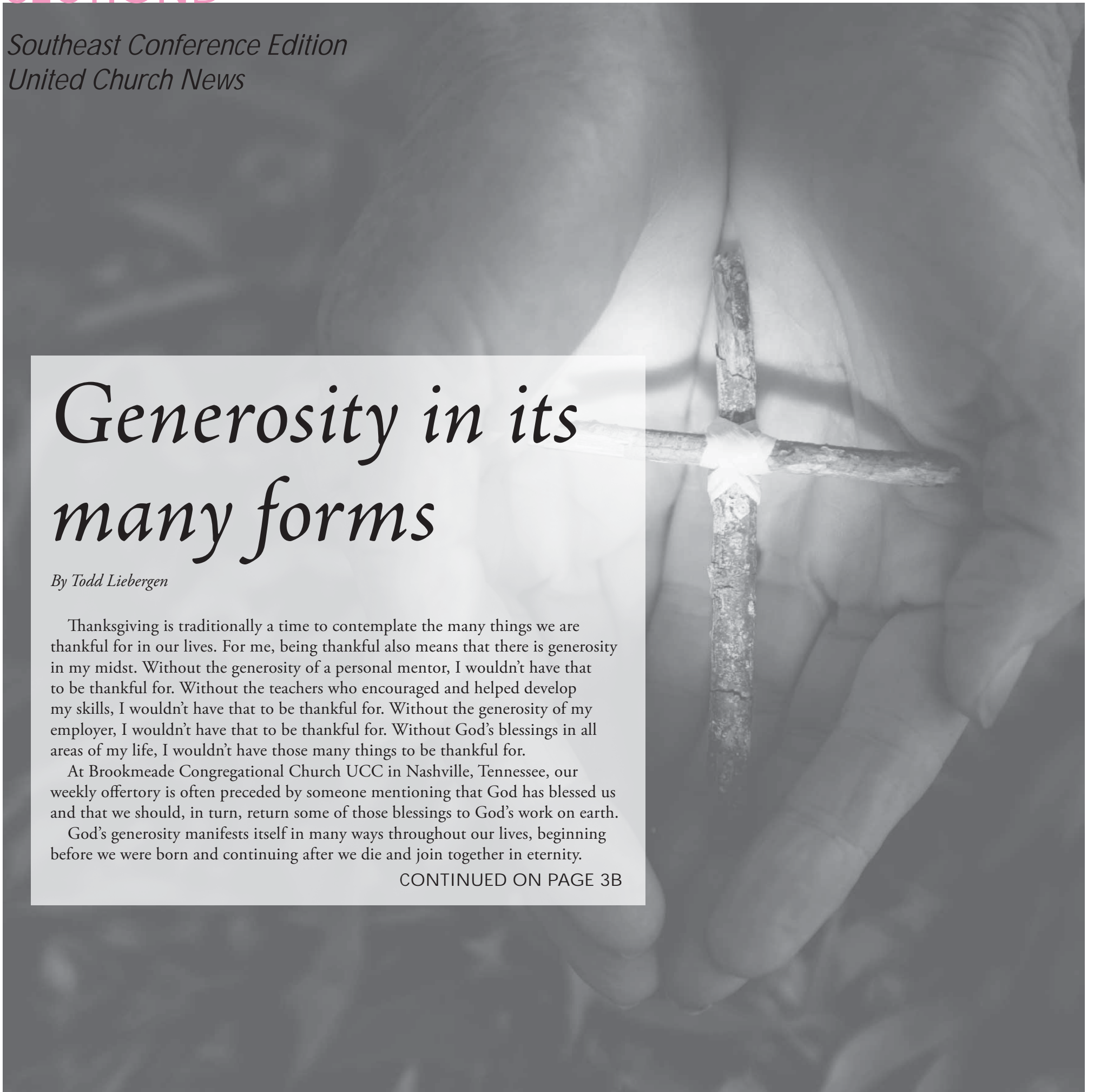
By Todd Liebergen

Thanksgiving is traditionally a time to contemplate the many things we are thankful for in our lives. For me, being thankful also means that there is generosity in my midst. Without the generosity of a personal mentor, I wouldn't have that to be thankful for. Without the teachers who encouraged and helped develop my skills, I wouldn't have that to be thankful for. Without the generosity of my employer, I wouldn't have that to be thankful for. Without God's blessings in all areas of my life, I wouldn't have those many things to be thankful for.

At Brookmeade Congregational Church UCC in Nashville, Tennessee, our weekly offertory is often preceded by someone mentioning that God has blessed us and that we should, in turn, return some of those blessings to God's work on earth.

God's generosity manifests itself in many ways throughout our lives, beginning before we were born and continuing after we die and join together in eternity.

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Open Doors

By Rev. Kathy Clark

During my recent sabbatical, I spent a month as a sojourning pastor at a small Presbyterian church in the mountains of Northeast Georgia, close to where I live. It is a picturesque, serene, white country church, like the illustration on the front of Christmas cards that are sold in drug stores, two boxes for the price of one. The building is set against the backdrop of a pastoral paradise, complete with rolling hills, hay bales, and requisite black and white cows whose moos can be heard through the open windows during Sunday morning services. The double doors of this church, set flush with the building under a protective portico, are at the end of a pathway made of rocks from the nearby mountains, up several stoned steps flanked by slightly wobbling iron railings. The doors are painted a beautiful bright blue, not quite a Presbyterian blue, but more of a cerulean blue, like the deepest color of the mountain sky on a clear day. There is a vibrancy to these doors that is way too unpredictable and out of the ordinary to be considered Presbyterian blue.

These doors are the kind you dream of – literally. One of the members told me this story: She had been living in the area for close to a year when a kind of restlessness overtook her. She wanted something, but she didn't know what – like craving a midnight snack that nothing in the kitchen satisfies or remembering the taste of a particularly fine wine shared with a love from long ago. One night she fell asleep and dreamed of blue doors. When she awoke, she had a feeling she knew the doors, but she didn't quite know how or from when or where. On her way to work that morning, on the road she had travelled daily since moving to the mountains, she suddenly recognized the blue doors of the little country church. That is how she found her way to Nacoochee Presbyterian Church. Like Joseph who dreamed of taking his young family to Egypt in order to escape impending disaster, this woman found a safe sanctuary in her dreams. What I appreciate about her story is that she not only dreamed of the doors, she recognized in her dream an invitation to enter them. In her awake-life, she had the courage to respond to the invitation by walking through them. Once through those doors, she found the satisfaction to her longing, in a community of individuals in a church that never locks its doors.

That is what I love about these doors. Yes, their startling color against the white backdrop of a simple country church irresistibly draws my eye to them. But the fact that they are never locked startles me even more. It shocks me into the recognition that this community, when it declares that all are welcome here, really and literally means it.

Recently, our beloved United Church of Christ, through the generosity of individual members and churches, was able to run what has become known as the “Steeple Ad” on television, announcing the good news that all are welcome to enter the doors of our churches. Churches throughout our conference have received emails and telephone calls from individuals who never dared to dream that there are doors of churches open to them, where all are safe, welcome, and valued.

In this season of generosity and gratitude, I am deeply thankful to the Board of Directors of the Southeast Conference for the gift of my sabbatical, during which I was able, among other things, to spend time with ecumenical brothers and sisters who share our values of hospitality and inclusion. I am grateful for the privilege of ministering alongside the members of our conference in and through the TAP program, who inspire me by their passion for and commitment to lifelong learning in our faith. I am grateful to be a part of this denomination, where all are welcome to grow in wisdom and worship in faith, to give glory to God by their very being. I am grateful for the gift of open doors!

~Rev. Kathy Clark is an Associate Conference Minister of the Southeast Conference and serves as the Program Director of TAP (*Theology Among the People*).



Grace and Peace

From the Conference Minister

Dear Friends,

As I write this letter, many of our congregations are engaged in fall campaigns to raise support for their next years budget. Often, in this season, budgets are presented, members challenged to reach for the goals, and the success of campaigns are measured against whether or not the “budget is met”. I am confident that there is not a church in the Southeast Conference that does not have the capacity in its members giving to meet the needs of its ministries. The issue is not whether members will support the ministries of the church, but whether the church is sufficiently convicted by its own vision. In a word, we often think that we have a money problem when we have a vision problem. I believe that when we practice a spirit of generosity in response to God's great gifts to us, there will always be a sufficiency. A generous response of thanks with our “time, talents and treasure” as a part of our spiritual discipline is the beginning of support for a church's ministries.

I believe, as a mentor once taught me, that “the heart is not emptied by loving nor the pocketbook by giving”. The act of loving another enriches our lives. Likewise our giving is a source of renewal and enriches our souls. I have never met an unhappy generous person, because their giving has focused their life, and strengthened a sense of purpose and meaning within it.

It sounds counterintuitive to say “the more you give away, the more you have left.” Time and again, I find that those who respond thankfully to God out of generosity find their lives reoriented, and their perspectives on their need and the needs of the church and its ministries changed. They live their lives in a spirit of abundance not scarcity, of joy, not anxiety and fear.

The Apostle Paul reminds us with his words; “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” We have been provided blessings at God's hand that are given us as a trust. When I was young as we took the offering in Sunday School, we sang; “we give thee but thine own/ what'er the gift may be/all that we have is thine alone/ a trust O God from thee.” What we have been given is not a reward for lives faithfully lived, but as a trust for God.

Leading stewardship workshops, I have often guided people through a reflection on their family budget as a true statement of what they value and hold first in their lives. Words come at no cost to us. Our budgets are a reality check on whether our giving matches with priorities as we name them, whether we “walk the walk” while “talking the talk”.

I hope in this season of financial uncertainty your spirit of generosity remains undiminished, and your thanks to God begins every prayer you pray.

Peace,

Tim Downs

Timothy C. Downs
Conference Minister



Did You Know?

Interesting UCC Facts



■ In 2005, UCC members contributed a record-shattering \$9 million through national church offices to support national and international relief - fueled by churchwide concern for victims of the tsunami in Asia and East Africa, the hurricanes in the southeastern U.S., violence in Darfur and the Sudan, the earthquake in Pakistan and Kashmir, as well as global hunger and the spread of HIV/AIDS infection.

■ Southeast Conference established a fund in the amount of \$15,000 with support from One Great Hour of Sharing to assist evacuees who were settling in the

Southeast Conference area after Hurricane Katrina. The funds were used to provide housing and food to those displaced in Atlanta. Also, a scholarship was awarded to a student at Talladega College who was also displaced from New Orleans by Katrina.

■ UCC's youth ministry, along with youth groups from the Southeast Conference, participated in the in hosting “Souper Bowl Sundays”. 2007 ‘Souper Bowl of Caring’ anti-hunger effort, which was held during NFL Super Bowl weekend. Youth Groups across the Southeast Conference participated

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AROUND THE CONFERENCE:

News from Local Congregations

Kirkwood United Church of Christ “The Blessing of the Animals 2008”

All pets are welcome...and people, too. And the four legged creatures and the two legged creatures gathered in great numbers in the Bessie Branham Park in Atlanta (a section of the Kirkwood community) for the 2nd annual Kirkwood UCC Blessing of the Animals. Oh the dogs out numbered the cats, no doubt about it, but make no mistake—the cats made a good showing. Well, and there was one caterpillar that inched her way toward a blessing!

Our church teamed up with our local pet store, Kirkwood Feed and Seed, and coffee shop,

Gathering Grounds, in hopes of inviting all of our neighborhood pet lovers and dog walkers to the blessing. After a brief worship service, we blessed nearly 40 animals by the end of the morning. It was a great opportunity to reach out to our community—sharing with people the love God has for all of us—ALL of us. We gave thanks to God for our pets and asked God to continue to care for them and for us.

I continue to be amazed at God’s goodness and grace offered to all of us. So many of the folks that came to the blessing were community people—not so much church people—yet. And many of them expressed in some way or another how good it was to be a part of something like this—how much they missed feeling connected to other people outside of their day to day routine. I say all of that, only to say to this “we really do need God in our lives and we really do need each other—don’t we?” And I am remembering--learning, as a church person, that the church must be living and moving and willing to always be the church, or the community of faith or

the body of Christ—inside, outside, at the pet store, the coffee shop, in the neighborhood, at the gas station, or in the park—whenever-wherever we find ourselves in the world. Always reaching in and reaching out to show and share the love of God for all of God’s creatures—we need each other—all of us—two legs—four legs.

“Let all things their Creator bless, and worship God in humbleness, O praise Him! Alleluia! Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son, and praise the Spirit, Three in One!”

~Article Written By: Rev. Susannah Davis



Generosity in Its Many Forms....

Cover Story Cont’d.

Many people believe that God is generous and point to our many material possessions as evidence of that generosity. I believe that God also shows generosity through faith, without all the material goods.

As part of God’s family on earth, we are called to be generous to one another and to God’s creation.

As individuals, none of us can possibly do everything for everyone.

All of us have time to give, some more and some less. Many of us, including me, serve on church boards and committees and that is one way to be generous with time. I also believe in being generous with my time by communicating regularly with a wide variety of family, friends and others.

All of us have skills and abilities to share, whether we realize it or not. The master entrusted his servants, who used their skills and abilities to make good use of the talents he had given them while he was away. We are called to be generous with our skills and abilities to help God’s creation. Organizing the church library or doing data entry for the school PTA are important parts of being a good steward of God’s generosity. With a background in accounting, I enjoy using that in my numerous roles as treasurer, committee member and other ways that I help the many nonprofits in Nashville.

All of us have money to donate, in moderation and maybe even in abundance. Jesus recognized the generosity of the widow putting her two small copper coins in the temple treasury, even if it wasn’t worth as much monetarily as some other offerings given that day. We are called to be generous with our money to help God’s creation. I recently learned of a homeless person in our neighborhood who collects recyclables to earn money to live on. Collecting cans and giving them is an important part of being a good steward of God’s generosity.

I tithe at Brookmeade, confident that my contribution is being used to further God’s work on earth, both inside the church and in the greater community. I also believe in being generous with my treasure by buying the homeless person lunch, using my donation as an opportunity to thank the Salvation Army bell ringer during the holidays, and helping a family on the other side of the world through Heifer International’s innovative programming.

Generosity has two sides. The giver of the time, talent or treasure is certainly generous with their gifts. Without the generosity of the receiver to be open to and accept the offered gifts, there would be no generosity from the giver. We all have a role to play. When times are good, we can cheerfully give. When times are not good, we can cheerfully receive, recognizing that someone has to receive in order for others to be able to give.

Generosity is also an attitude. I believe this hierarchy can call us in many different ways at many different times in our lives as we recognize the many forms of generosity in our daily lives. I invite us, as individuals and as communities of faith to consider where God is leading today.

Beginning with the most meritorious generosity, according to Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon:

- Giving when neither party knows the other’s identity.
- Giving when you know the recipient’s identity, but the recipient doesn’t know your identity.
- Giving when you do not know the recipient’s identity, but the recipient knows your identity.
- Giving before being asked.
- Giving after being asked.
- Giving less than you should, but giving it cheerfully.
- Giving begrudgingly.

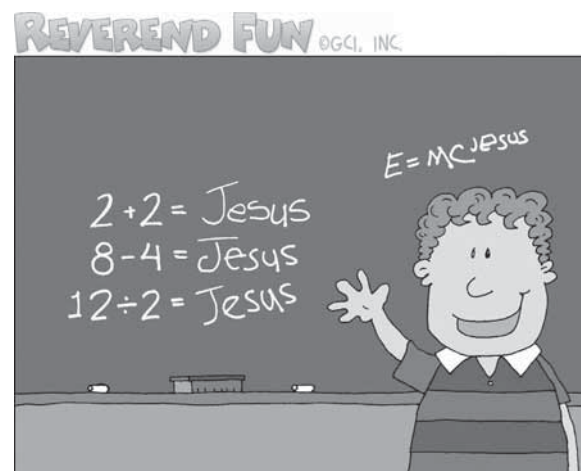
~Todd Liebergen is a committed member of Brookmeade Congregational UCC located in Nashville, TN and an active participant in the Nashville TAP group.

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IN BIBLE CLASS WE LEARNED THAT JESUS IS THE ANSWER

Modeling the Mission

Interview with Ronnie Galvin

Ronnie Galvin is a member of Sankofa UCC and works with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. He is also a member of the SEC New Church Development Advisory Team, helping with the assessment and supervision of new church planters in the Southeast Conference.

1. What kind of community service work do you do in the Atlanta area?

I am Community Builder, with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Atlanta Civic Site here in Atlanta, Georgia (<http://www.atlantacivicsite.org/>). The Annie E. Casey is one of the largest and most well-known foundations in the country addressing issues that affect the quality of life for vulnerable children and families.

The Atlanta work focuses on struggling, yet reemerging neighborhoods in Atlanta's inner city, in the vicinity of Turner Field (Home of the Atlanta Braves). We have a three-pronged strategy to help revitalize these communities. They are: Education Achievement, Family Economic Success, and Neighborhood Transformation (see website).

I work in the Neighborhood Transformation Strategy Area. Currently we are engaged in effort to enhance the physical environment and social connections in the community. Using the best practices of equitable development and social networking principles, it is our goal to help redevelop the community in a way that "does no harm" to existing residents, and that goes further to privilege the families in our community who are struggling the most. My role in the work is to facilitate the building and strengthening of resident networks so that they define, lead, own, benefit from, and sustain the transformation occurring in our community.

2. What are the greatest challenges facing the communities in which you are working?

We have coined a term that frames the multifarious challenges faced by our communities — "development induced trauma." These communities, like (unfortunately) many other communities of color in urban centers around the country, have endured the pressure of gentrification and other development policies and practices that strain social connections and limit equitable access to resources.

Upwards of 7000 families (almost 3500 in our neighborhoods) have been relocated, forcibly removed if you will, from their homes as a result of the development momentum created by the 1996 Olympics. The development history of these neighborhoods points to trauma felt by families in these communities. I-75/85 runs right through the middle of these communities.

Those families who by whatever methods managed to remain in these communities are now plagued with the proliferation of vacant and unoccupied properties — the result of continued speculative development at the hands of investors driven by profit and greed rather than true community development. To be sure the current crisis in the mortgage and banking industries are epitomized in the epidemic of vacant properties in our community.

3. Where do you see progress being made in your fight for social equality and justice?

I believe that the development work we are doing at University Avenue (UNAVE) and the work of the Dirty Truth Campaign are two examples of progress. We are initiating the UNAVE project with the intention of doing development in a way that increases the socio-economic prospects for the families in our community and region who are struggling the most — this isn't just an intention for us, it's a non-negotiable. We hope that our work will become a model that changes the way development is done in the city and the region.

We are also clear that in order for struggling and vulnerable families in tough communities to "win" that we have to be more intentional and strategic about their efforts to build and direct power that supports their self-interests. Sadly and ironically the city that supposedly is the "cradle of the civil rights movement" has lost its mooring, choosing rather to emphasize physical development over the social, political, and spiritual development necessary to have a more equitable city and just society. Again, the UNAVE project is an attempt to again bring together these two vital aspects — physical and human development. Along with UNAVE, residents in our community have organized two efforts to fight back against the forces that continue to undermine community life--

The Dirty Truth Campaign (dirtytruth.org) — an effort where residents have identified health and safety challenges affecting the quality of life in their neighborhood. currently the group is working to address the vacant property challenge in the community through public advocacy, media, and by helping struggling families take possession of these houses.

The Southside Tenants Union — residents who have come together to address quality of life issues experienced by families who rent in our community, landlord-tenant relations, unlawful evictions, rent disputes, and improving the overall quality of life in both multi-family and stand alone properties are all issues addressed by this group.

4. How can our Southeast conference churches support your work?

Funding, technical assistance, influence, and public advocacy remain as very clear and concrete ways the SECUCC can help support our work. There are ample opportunities for the Church to link up with the families in our community to assist with immediate needs around food, clothing, housing, and other quality of life supports. More importantly however, I think that the UCC's tradition and affinity for social justice and community organizing could add tremendous momentum to our work. A lot of influence and power resides in both the pulpits and the pews of our churches. Perhaps we can figure out a way to make that power and influence work on behalf of those in our city who are struggling the most — in the interest of creating a more fair, just, and equitable city.

recommended reading

It's the traditional church season of stewardship, tucked in the autumn Sundays before Advent. With this church season comes the theme of generosity. These resource suggestions offer three with this thought—two that suggest ways we can be generous and one that proclaims God's generosity to us.

Generous Saints: Congregations Rethinking Ethics and Money by James Hudnut-Beumler.

An older (1999) resource from Alban Institute, this book is about money and its place in our lives and in our churches. It is not a book about how to get more money for the church but rather one that asks us to rethink how we ought to live faithfully in a material world. The central question is: How shall we live with what we have?

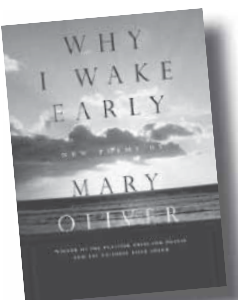
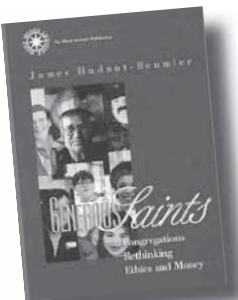
Rich — from the *Nooma series* by Rob Bell. (Zondervan, 2006)

This 12 minute video invites us to consider what it means as Americans to have been blessed by God and to ask the question: How does what we have compare to what most people in the world have? Maybe what we have is enough; maybe it is more than enough. Maybe God has blessed us with everything we have so we can bless and give to others.

Why I Wake Early by Mary Oliver (Beacon Press, 2004)

Mary Oliver has been writing poetry for nearly five decades, and in that time she has become America's foremost poetic voice on our experience of the physical world; Mary Oliver's exquisite view of the generosity of God's goodness and grace as seen through nature.

This volume includes poems on crickets, toads, trout lillies, bears; on greeting the morning, watching deer, and, finally, on lingering in happiness. Each poem is imbued with the extraordinary perceptions of a poet at the height of her power, considering the everyday in our lives and finding reasons to marvel at all around her.



Just for Fun

